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DAVID BATCHELOR UNPLUGGED

He's celebrated for his vast electric light works, but Batchelor's core concern is colour. Whilst adding the final touches to his latest show, Unplugged, he told Art World why he's "gone acoustic" – and cut his link with the mains

INTERVIEW: Martin Holman
STUDIO PHOTOS: Duve Cowlard



"When I'm described as a 'colourist' I shiver, because the term is associated with painters of nature, which is nothing to do with me. Our experience of colour has been transformed in the past 100 years"



Since the mid-1990s David Batchelor's work has been concerned with colour: the intense, shiny, coarse tones – damaged and dirty – redolent of the city, and just as synthetic.

"When I'm described as a 'colourist' I shiver because the term is associated with painters of nature, which is nothing to do with me," Batchelor says. "Our experience of colour has been transformed in the past 100 years primarily through electrification and petrochemicals. That transformation interests me."

This interest resulted in his celebrated 3D works of brightly painted façades, contrasting with their reverse support structures, and in shelf-like arrangements of flat perspex panels featuring a single colour. Trays of colour fixed to low trolleys resembled horizontal monochrome paintings on wheels, and when he scavenged some discarded light boxes and cleaned them up, panels were fitted and wired to spill electric colour into a room like illuminated high street signage at night.

The work rose from the floor, barricaded doorways, leant against walls and hung overhead to fulfil the artist's objective – the repatriation of colour to the heart of life experience. But Batchelor recently became aware that he was being perceived as a maker of "light work" so, commissioned by Edinburgh University to make a new, site-specific work for their Talbot Rice Gallery, he decided to pull the plug. The cabling in this exhibition had no link with the mains; it was coiled into a sphere and presented as a sculptural object. This show was strictly Unplugged. "This is my acoustic set," he said. "No electrics."

The allusion to music is not accidental. Batchelor listens to music in his studio, a lot. And not as background noise but as a serious presence, because Batchelor collects, and from what he collects, he builds, tossing back small fry once he has sieved its possible value through his interrogative mind. (Asked if he keeps up to date with current music trends, the 52-year-old replies that his studio assistants, all in their 20s and 30s, bring him new sounds to listen to. In return he plays them "old stuff" from the CDs neatly shelved above his desk – early Bob Dylan, Neil Young, The Band, Velvet Underground, Leonard Cohen.)

This urge to collect goes for the ephemera of daily life as well as music. What he likes is imported, stored, retrieved and recycled, and in that way remains current. An artist who relies on the ready-made, the discarded and the pre-used appraises nothing as automatically a throwaway. "What you throw away can be more interesting than what you keep," he argues.

The plastic stuff that Batchelor began accumulating 18 months ago for his Edinburgh show – brushes (for hair,

for dishes, for the sink), grips (for hair, for shelving), combs (for hair), as well as mirrors, knives, spoons, forks – was sourced from high street pound shops. His favourites were the ones around Bethnal Green (not far from his east London studio), Holloway (near where he used to get his car fixed, before it was stolen), as well as Glasgow and Edinburgh where he was working. He often bought in bulk, much to the puzzlement of the shop assistants. "I was hesitant about saying I was an artist, so I explained that I worked for an artist who used these things," he says, thereby leaving his suppliers only a little wiser but often £60 richer. These transactions could bring out a trader's entire family to wave this customer farewell (or, they hoped, *au revoir*).

As his unusual preoccupation became known, students at the Royal College of Art – where he is senior tutor in Critical Theory – augmented his stock with their own finds, including plastic cutlery from the Sharjah Biennial, which some had recently visited.

Other offerings from exotic locations reinforced what Batchelor had already realised: that, in whatever city they were purchased, the pegs or combs had a common place of origin – China – and were sold pre-eminently by entrepreneurial Asians. The use of these objects in Batchelor's work points to today's global economic exchange, and how one society's demands are supplied by another which is itself aspiring to the lifestyles of its products' consumers.

Batchelor began to play with these improbable materials in his studio, "an interesting place where you are able to follow up the consequences of your mistakes". Several small tabletop constructions, like the toy cranes, were one early result. Questions followed, as happens in experiments, the most important being how to enlarge these structures. The solution arrived when Batchelor fastened his plastic treasures to columns of Dexion, the lightweight slotted metal construction system for racking and industrial shelving that is, in Batchelor's words, "such beautiful stuff", and often featured in his earlier walls and towers of light boxes.

What finally emerged were the 23 pillars that formed the heart of the Unplugged exhibition: pylons bristling with plastic that were severely monochrome alongside others that were brazenly kaleidoscopic: yellow and blue, orange and black, white and grey, magenta and several shades of green and turquoise.

A thread running through Batchelor's work is connectivity; linkages branch into networks like pegs on a steel armature. Batchelor unfolds possibilities around



1 *Candela 7* (2006), detail, 450 plastic bottles, low energy lamps, cable, dimensions variable

2 *Barrier* (2002), found lightboxes, acrylic sheet, vinyl, fluorescent light, plugboards, cable, 285 x 267 x 25cm

3 *I Love King's Cross and King's Cross Loves Me, 1* (1997), found objects, acrylic sheet, enamel paint, dimensions variable

Opposite: Batchelor's studio desk



"I am aware of collage and montage as part of what I do, and that my work is indebted to painting more than sculpture ... but since Picasso, artists have been drawn to both"



his core concern with colour: from shape to colour to line; between front and back, frame and border, society and artistic practice, and between art and life. His objects are wired into a realisation that our visual experiences can be compellingly continuous and entwined.

With that contention lies further allusion. It may help to picture his pillars as the communications masts that now cluster on city roofs more commonly than birds, frayed-edged electronics that invisibly listen, receive and relay. Like them, Batchelor's work sustains conversations; what artists and writers like to describe as "dialogues" with real and theoretical events and ideas.

He is averse to concealing the how and why in the appearance of the objects he makes. Cabling, bolts and armatures remain visible, and the strange wonder of the pillars is nourished by the sheer simplicity of clipping, bolting and fixing. Nor does he hide references to other art – Warhol's brilliant off-register colours, perhaps, or the painting-reliefs and radical constructivism of revolution-era Russian artist Vladimir Tatlin.

Batchelor keeps the historical avant-garde in his sights (as many artists do), both respectfully and cheekily, but never overbearingly. The resonance of these references is enhanced less by his modest description of himself as "someone who once made paintings" than by his continuing role as a writer and graduate of Birmingham's interdisciplinary Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. The combination is forceful: the CCCS, for instance, nurtured a methodology that evaluated the effects and interpretations of diverse elements such as Marxism, structuralism and sociology. But when references to Joseph Beuys, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd and André Cadere infiltrate Batchelor's objects, they appear in a natural, unselfconscious way.

Informed by history and philosophy as much as by experiment, his work quotes confidently from early modernist practice. Batchelor has matured into an artist with his own voice, one who forges his own solutions to the problems each work poses. The liberation in finding, combining and making is his paramount activity.

Colour emerges as his agent for transcending the banal functions of his frugal materials. Batchelor's confidence with his subject allows him to leave the pegs, combs and mirrors alone as vehicles for colour. The effort reflects his desire to avoid working with the materials we expect from an artist, an especially hard condition in an era of intense heterogeneity. His drawings, for example, are made on card or on lined, squared or graph paper bought in stationers' shops and newsagents.

Hitherto a studio resource shown only to fellow artists and friends, the 50 drawings shown in Edinburgh, dating from 1999 to the present, are the first he has exhibited in public.

Batchelor has always been absorbed by drawing – an activity which allows him to swap the practicality of construction for the wilder shores of inventing fantasy sculpture – and writing notes about work he may never make. Drawings, classified and stored in a plan chest, also foster the continual review of ideas he has not followed through. "There are always loose ends; drawing is a way of remembering those loose ends," he says.

Also a deviation from artistic practice is Batchelor's role as orchestrator rather than composer. The musical terminology is apposite since Batchelor insists that the notion of "composition" did not apply to the pillars; his part was to frame his agglomerations and to add to, shape and edit them. That the pillars still resonate to the language of painting, arguably the strongest discourse in his work, highlights Batchelor's perspective on his own and many contemporaries' practice.

Just as his plugged-in light boxes parley with thoughts of the dissonant rhythmic hues of Times Square and Barnett Newman's painted expanses that inspired him as a young man visiting New York, so the individual modules in *Unplugged* build up to imply a colour mosaic of marks. "I am aware of collage and montage as part of what I do, and that my work is indebted to painting more than sculpture," he comments. "It's 3D now and so resembles sculpture, but since Picasso artists have been drawn to both and avoided both simultaneously, I do not consider myself medium-bound."

Four years ago Batchelor made a tree, and planted it on London's South Bank near City Hall. Sitting on a slender stalk was its bloated green canopy; standing between buildings, it shone happily. Only, of course, it wasn't a tree; overtly fabricated in steel and plastic, it was just as credibly a lollipop. But observing this work by an artist of the urban condition reminded me of a passage, arguably rose-tinted, that Richard Hoggart – coincidentally the founder of Birmingham's CCCS – wrote in his 1957 book *The Uses of Literacy*, about working-class community life. "Most absorbing of all to a boy are the games of the street, with the lamp-post taking the place of the tree on the village green." Simultaneously frivolous and essential, that is how we live in the city.

David Batchelor's new work will be showing at Wilkinson Gallery, London, from October; www.wilkinsongallery.com



1 *Pillar drawing, 06 (2007)*, ink and highlighter pen on lined paper, 200 x 126 mm

2, 3 *Unplugged (2007)*, installation view, Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh

Opposite: Details from David Batchelor's studio, July 2007, as he prepared for the *Unplugged* show

